

INTERVIEW: NATHAN SCHIFF

After harrowing hallucinations of giant apes and UFO's, Nathan H. Schiff got the hell scared out of him by Roger Corman's *IT CONQUERED THE WORLD*. He was a child of the Sixties, immersed in the Chiller Theatres of television where *UNKNOWN ISLAND*, *GODZILLA: KING OF THE MONSTERS*, *THE KILLER SHREWS*, *ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS* and *NIGHT OF THE BLOOD BEAST* put a frenzied dent upon his prepubescent medula. A native of Long Island, New York, Schiff went on to explore outer reaches of horror and sci-fi movies while his peers fell back on the inevitable football and baseball activities so ruthlessly pushed on American youth.

At the age of 11, Schiff received an 8mm silent camera and proceeded to turn the family dog into a creature of destruction. The epic, *INVASION OF THE DOG MONSTER*, gave Schiff his first crack at special effects and miniatures. Toy blocks served as buildings, toy tanks as an Army. Dog food was stuffed into the buildings and his monster quickly devoured civilization. Unfortunately, the young filmmakers inexperience resulted in

DAVID LAZARUS

a double-exposed image making for his first (and possibly only) unintentional surrealist short.

Between 1973 and 1978 Schiff made about sixteen short silent movies, most of them horror oriented. He eventually got his hands on an 8mm sound camera and was on his way to making less amateurish efforts. His first, *WEASELS RIP MY FLESH*, actually played to an audience.

Currently, with *THE LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE* and *THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS HERE ANYMORE* to his credit, twenty-five year old Schiff is preparing his latest, most ambitious

project, a wild horror/comedy film yet untitled.

DAVID LAZARUS: What prompted you to use graphic violence?

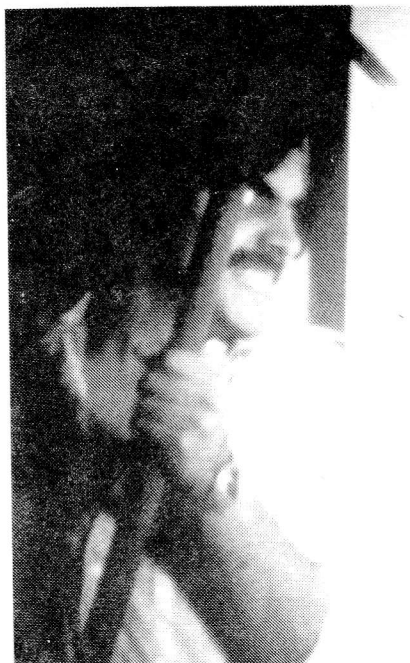
NATHAN SCHIFF: Back in 1972, my parents took me to the movies. It was a double-bill, but I didn't know what was playing. My father told me it was a comedy called *THE TWELVE CHAIRS*, the Mel Brooks picture. As we entered the theatre the movie was already in progress. I couldn't understand what it had to do with twelve chairs -- it had these two girls going to a rock concert and then being kidnapped.



*Fred Dabby removes a fragment of meat from a dismembered arm in *WEASELS RIP MY FLESH**

I was waiting to see some chairs when suddenly these creeps start raping the girls. Then they chopped them up and disemboweled them! I was mortified yet completely enthralled. My mother kept trying to cover my eyes! I quickly batted her hand away. Never had I been affected by a film like this since IT CONQUERED THE WORLD when I was four. Now I was twelve and watching rape, castration, disembowelment, dismemberment, and profanity, with spit and urine thrown in for good measure. This, of course, was the notorious, uncut LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT. Why my parents didn't walk out or take me away I'll never know. The audience was in shock and I can still remember some of the horrified comments. THE TWELVE CHAIRS followed immediately -- I'd love to meet the psycho who booked that double feature! Of course, I was never the same since!

The came NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, the



The mad Dr. (Fred Borges) threatens Inspector Cameron (John Smihula) with a garden hoe in WEASELS RIP MY FLESH



The Dr. (Fred Borges) is upset in WEASELS RIP MY FLESH

second and most powerful of the atrocity films I'd seen. I caught it on a Friday night in 1973 when it first aired on TV, uncut. (Now all the TV prints are censored) I was hooked by this insane world I never could of fathomed had existed. I then tried to trace every obscure sickie I could find through all the horror and monster magazines. I couldn't believe all of

the titles I discovered but could never see. I DRINK YOUR BLOOD was one that I never forgot about - what a premise! And then the films of Herschell Gordon Lewis: an article appeared in THE MONSTER TIMES... what stills they had! A girl lying on a table with her heart torn out, another girls arm chopped off with stringy meat dangling about, and an interview with the man who created these lovely awe-inspiring images. But still no films to see; only occasional pictures of a short synopsis.

Then one day after at least five years of trying to view his films - if just two frames of any of them - I had the wonderful opportunity to sit through one of the most imaginative events since THE WIZARD OF OZ...

DL: What was that?

NS: None other than H.G. Lewis's THE WIZARD OF GORE! BLOOD FEAST



followed soon after. Suddenly my eyes were opened to what filmmaking and life in general was all about.

DL: Could you tell us about WEASELS RIP MY FLESH?

NS: That was my first feature film. I made it while still in high school. It's about a Venus space rocket launched from Earth to collect samples of the planets surface. On its return trip it malfunctions and crashes into the ocean. The specimens wash ashore in silver cannisters. Two kids find the specimens, and after one of the boys is bitten on the foot by a rabid weasel, decide to pour the contents of the cannisters into the weasel hole as to flush it out. Instead, the glob transforms the little weasel into a giant, rabid killer. A mad scientist enters the plot and two investigating detectives get caught up in all the confusion. It's a silly picture but a lot of fun.

DL: WEASELS was written up in the New York paper, Newsday...did you gain any contacts through the newspaper article?

NS: No, not at all. A funny thing, though: I was getting bombarded with phone calls, mostly from people trying to make movies themselves. One call was from a man I never heard of, but who claimed he'd made several horror films which were very successful. He wanted to meet me. He asked me if I shot ten-to-one, fiveto-one, etc. I said, "How about

one-to-one?" He came to my house with all these pressbooks, and claimed he wrote and produced THE BODY BENEATH, GURU: THE MAD MONK and some others. I think one pressbook was from THE BLOODTHIRST BUTCHERS and another from THE MAN WITH TWO HEADS. He told me all the stories. I showed him a still from COLOR ME BLOOD RED. He said, "Look at that lousy shot." I never saw him after that day. Years later, after reading about all the exploitation films, I thought I had met Andy Milligan. It turns out it was Monte Issacs, who actually did the screenplay for THE BODY BENEATH.

DL: Did he see your film?

NS: At that point all I had was WEASELS RIP MY FLESH. He liked the music and wanted to know where I'd gotten it. He wanted to use it in future films he may

produce. I declined to tell him I stole the scores from HORROR OF PARTY BEACH and THE HORRIBLE DR. HITCHCOCK.

DL: Then there was THE LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE...

NS: Yes, I'd written a great script for that one. But on the first day's shooting I realized it was impossible to shoot with the time at hand and the availability of actors. We were very committed to that film, we were going to make a good, strong horror picture. That's when the fun began for us - - but not the audience. Wherein WEASALS was ludicrous and campy, despite some doses of graphic blood letting, CANNIBAL MASSACRE was more serious and gloomy. The violence was more pronounced, more realistic. Personally, I liked the story: a slightly unbalanced man must feed his leper father human flesh. He hires two homicidal killers to come up



Poor girl (Beverly Khazzain) has a lawnmower face lift in LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE

with some fresh meat. It's a violent picture, but I never take it seriously and, really, I think the humor comes through rather well. The film ran two hours upon completion, and I've since cut it down to 92-minutes.

DL: What about *THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE*?

NS: No matter what anyone thinks of *GRASS*, it's a sheer miracle that film even got made. It's a good picture.

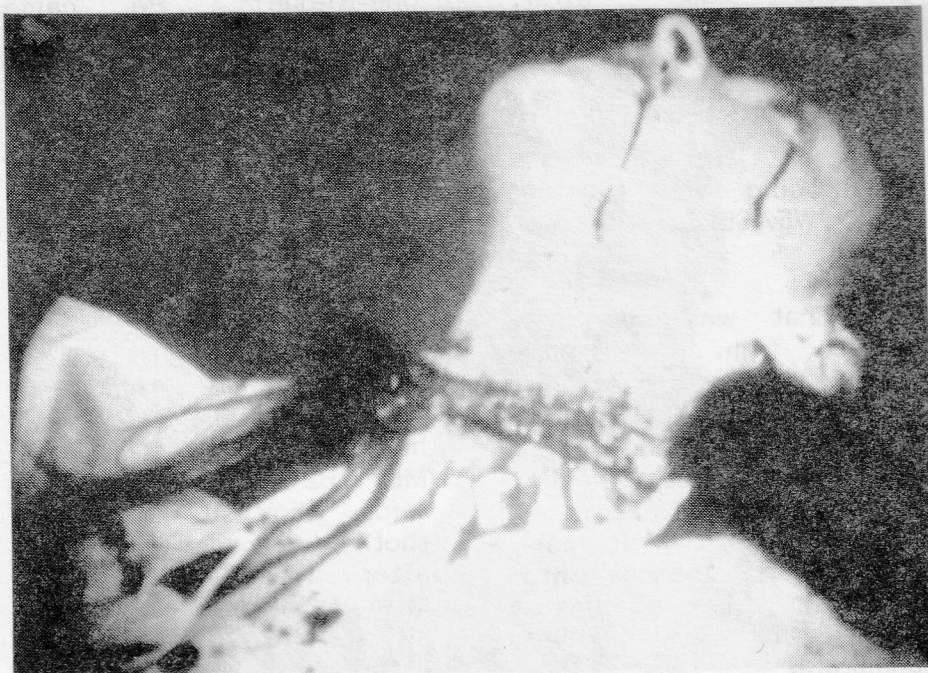
DL: It's also your most extreme in its depiction of graphic gore.

NS: Yes it is, but it's also a total comedy, thereby defusing the films extremities.

DL: It appears to be a social indictment on Yuppie society.

NS: The good ol' boys of the south versus those carpetbaggin' nothern city slickers. I find that amusing. What I don't find amusing is hearing in *TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2* the maniacs are attacking the Yuppies -- that's a direct rip-off of *THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE*. But there's nothing you can do when you're a low-budget outfit. We did it first. I don't know who got wind of it, but some wise guy probably caught an ad for *GRASS ANYMORE* in the *VILLAGE VOICE*, and decided to make a major feature from my low-budget obscurity.

Anyway, *GRASS ANYMORE* was shot in five days. Now, that ain't



A paper cut in LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE

bad for a 70 minute feature with noncommitted actors.

DL: Who does all the make-up and special effects?

NS: I do, and it's a pain in the hind-quarters. There's an incredible amount of pressure on you when you have to direct a film while setting

up and executing all the effects. In fact, I worked so hard on the effects for *CANNIBAL MASSACRE* that when it came to shooting *GRASS ANYMORE* I just didn't pour my heart into it at all. I think it shows. All the effects in *GRASS* were improvised on the spot -- nothing was tested, prepared or thought out. So a lot of gore is quite



Victim (Denise Calabrese) suffers in L.I.C.M.

laughable. Take the scene where the girl has a blockbuster put in her mouth and her face is blown apart -- it's great until I cut to that pathetic mock head before it explodes. People who should have been outraged were muttering about how fake it looked! Yet what would they say if it had been state of the art? "Oh, this is sick; I can't watch it anymore"??

DL: How do you feel about the highly negative reactions to your films, especially the violence?

NS: I can understand people hating the films because of the violence. But I seriously doubt they're the super freak shows critics have been leading everyone to believe. There's always so much misconception with these films. A good example is the film *SNUFF*, which was banned from the 8th Street Playhouse in New York by the women's group. For godssake, there's only about five minutes in that picture portraying a woman being assaulted. What about the countless other films where, for 90 minutes, violence is devoted towards women? *SNUFF* should have been banned just for being a lousy film that it is.

I don't deny my films as being gory, but its not serious at all. Not one moment in any of my pictures are they realistic on an aesthetic level. It's only life-size puppets filled with tomatoes and roast beef being ripped apart by ridiculous, nonfrightening villains.

DL: But all the victims



Her jeans were too long - THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE

are women. We also hear a lot of sexual references brought forth in your work. Anti-sexual attitudes about sex and women. In *THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE*, women's sexual organs are mutilated.

NS: If you see the films you will probably laugh, not cringe. I use that sort of violence because its never been done before. Any, if you have any conception of what's serious and obviously a visual gag, then it speaks for itself. Nobody who has watched these scenes has attacked me! They laugh. Why? Because it's funny. I create a completely phony and comical situation -- only fools take it seriously. People laugh; they don't throw up or picket the theatre.

DL: That may be true, but it doesn't alter the fact that you've blown away a woman's vagina with a shotgun, or have had a breast torn from

a woman's body. On the surface, you must see that these are misogynous images if not ideas.

NS: There is no misogyny in my films. Women represent non-violent, fragile creatures, physically speaking. What's a more frightening image: Goldie Hawn with a knife at her throat? Or Clint Eastwood with a gun to his head? I think we tend to squirm a little more with the female. We have a natural instinct to feel scared for a female. Women tend to have a more helpless presence when confronted with death on-screen.

DL: Where have your films played?

NS: Only on Long Island and around the New York metropolitan area. Thanks to Rick Sullivan, the mastermind behind his own *GORE GAZETTE*, which is infinitely more entertaining and informative than most of the commer-

cial magazines, who permitted me to show my films at his weekly horror/exploitation series. You haven't lived until your films have played right along side of classics like FASTER PUSSYCAT! KILL! KILL! and THE LAST HOUSE ON A DEAD END STREET.

DL: If you had a \$20 million budget, what would you make?

NS: Nothing too pretentious. Perhaps a remake of NOT OF THIS EARTH, or one of THE INDESTRUCTIBLE MAN. Only I would substitute women in the lead roles over men. Madonna instead of Paul Birch in NOT OF THIS EARTH - think about it! They both wear the same dark eyeglasses, and both have the same rosey personalities. And THE INDESTRUCTIBLE WOMAN - I'd have a petite beautiful blonde who's a homicidal killer who can push over skyscrapers, and she's hungry for revenge. Now watch: someone will actually go out and make it!



Two shackled victims (Lynn Campagno & Maura DelVecchio) eagerly await execution in THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE



Bruce the killer at and play with female subject (L.I.C.M)



Garroted blonde (Jacky Foley) in GRASS



Joe Marzano, Barbara Balmer, Nathan Schiff & Sam Fowler - shooting the video ENCOUNTER